



## AVATAR (Cert 12)

**Directed by:** James Cameron

**Running time:** 155 minutes

### SUMMARY

In 2154 the Resources Development Administration (RDA) is mining a valuable mineral called unobtainium from Pandora – a lush, Earth-like moon, in the Alpha Centauri system. Pandora is inhabited by the Na'vi – a tall, blue-skinned race who live in harmony with nature and worship a mother goddess called 'Eywa'. In order to build relationships and learn about the planet's biosphere, human scientists create Na'vi-human hybrid bodies called avatars that are operated via mental link by genetically matched humans.

Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a paraplegic former marine, arrives on Pandora to become an avatar operator. On his first visit into the forest with his avatar body, he becomes lost. He is rescued from predators by Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), a female Na'vi, who brings him to her clan. She teaches him their ways and he is initiated into the clan. However, when RDA start to destroy the Na'vi's sacred sites in pursuit of unobtainium, Jake is forced to decide whose side he is on.

*Avatar* is a groundbreaking feast for the eyes as we watch Jake explore the incredible world of Pandora. The breathtaking scenery helps to underline the film's key eco-friendly theme and emphasises the ugliness of corporate greed. The film also raises issues about how we relate to those who are different from us.

### WHAT YOU FELT ABOUT THE FILM

Sometimes young people find it hard to contribute to a group discussion. They may feel shy or that their contribution might appear silly. The first part of the

session is therefore a chance for young people to think about the film and begin to develop a reaction to what they have seen in a way that everyone will have something to contribute. This is a simple, quick exercise to get everyone thinking about their reaction to the film.

Explain that when *Avatar* hit the cinemas there were apparently several cases of people getting depressed because they thought Pandora was so beautiful they wanted to go there but, of course, it only exists in CGI.

Invite the young people to imagine that Pandora is a real place and that they are travel agents. They have to invent a holiday brochure blurb that will make people want to buy tickets to travel to Pandora (you may want to have a real brochure to hand to illustrate).

Remind them that, if there's things about a place that aren't so attractive, unscrupulous agents will try to sell them in a way which makes them sound a lot better (e.g. a hotel with cramped rooms and cockroaches might become 'cosy accommodation that allows you to appreciate the local wildlife'). How well can they sell both the attractive and less attractive parts of Pandora?

Divide the young people into groups to prepare, providing pens and paper if they want to jot down ideas. Once they've had a few minutes to prepare, invite each group to share their blurb.

### KEY THEMES IN THE FILM

*Avatar* is a pacey, visually impressive blockbuster, containing a strong message on the evils that corporate greed can inflict on the environment. Spirituality (of a New Age flavour) is also very much to the fore which can act as a good starting point for discussing, among other issues, the nature of spirituality back on Earth.

This section gives an opportunity for the young people to explore some of the themes the film introduces.

### 1. What price for the environment?

**The clip is in scene 4, starting at 11.35 and running until 13.26**

In the film the mining company, RDA, are the ultimate 'evil' company, who don't care at all about the wildlife or inhabitants of Pandora, as long as they can get their hands on the valuable mineral, unobtainium.

Ask the young people if they agree with what RDA did (destroying the forest). Show the young people a pot plant. Ask if anyone wants to kill the plant. Ask if anyone would kill it for 50p. What about £1? Keep upping the price until either everyone's price is found or it's clear that some young people won't be 'bought'?

If you have a pet to hand (cat, dog, goldfish, etc.) you can repeat the exercise. How much would it take to be willing to end this creature's life?

Make clear that you're not about to pay anyone for killing anything!

Ask the young people why they were (or weren't) willing to end the life of a living being for one price but not another. Ask if they think that it's wrong for companies to use the earth's natural resources. If yes, then how do we live (even the Na'vi killed for animals for food)? If no, what's to stop Earth's wildlife from being completely killed off as it was in *Avatar*?

**Key question:** At what point do we say 'no' to the exploitation of the earth?

#### *Relevant Bible verses:*

- Genesis 1.26–30
- Leviticus 25.3–5
- Deuteronomy 22.6–7

- Deuteronomy 25.4
- 1 Timothy 6.6–10

### 2. Just meals on wheels?

**The clip is in scene 5, starting at 13.26 and running until 18.23**

When Jake Sully arrives on Pandora in his wheelchair one of the marines describes him as 'meals on wheels.' The implication is that, because he's disabled, he's completely useless. Jake is clearly fed up with being told what to do and treated as helpless. When he first tries out his avatar body he gets carried away because he so enjoys having working legs again.

Ask the young people if they know anyone who has some form of permanent disability (hearing aid, visual impairment, in a wheelchair). If there is a young person in the group who is disabled in some way you might want to ask them to share their experiences. (Obviously, this is a sensitive issue; if you are going to do this you should probably ask them privately beforehand if they are comfortable sharing with the group.)

Explain to the group that they are going to get a brief insight into what it might feel like to have a disability. Divide the group into two teams. Explain that, as a team, they are going to have to race against the other team over a short distance. However, one of their team is paralysed and cannot move their arms or legs. It is the responsibility of the rest of the team to get them across the finish line (without injury!). Any team that hurts their 'paralysed' member will be disqualified.

Alternatively, you could do a similar exercise with one person on each team being blindfolded and having to be led verbally across the finish line (you might want to set up a few obstacles).

After the race, ask the 'disabled' people how they felt.

Did they feel that they contributed much to the team effort? Did any of the rest of the team feel hindered by the 'disabled' person?

This exercise can provide the starting point to a number of questions around the question of disability:

- Describe an ordinary day for you. How would that routine change if you were in a wheelchair?
- When we see someone with a disability, do we see the person or do we see the disability?
- Do you think that having a disability would affect your sense of self-worth? Why or why not?
- If you'd been in a wheelchair all your life, how do you think you'd react if, like Jake, you suddenly got a new body that was even better than the one you had before?
- What do you think you could do to make yourself more aware of the needs of those with disabilities?
- Some cultures believe that those with disabilities are being punished by God. How would you respond if someone told you that was what they believed?

**Key question:** Should what state our body is in make any difference to the way others see us?

**Relevant Bible verses:**

- Matthew 11.2–5
- John 9.1–7
- 1 Corinthians 1.26–31
- 1 Corinthians 15.35–44
- 2 Corinthians 12.7–9

### 3. Culture Shock

**The clip is in scene 20, starting at 1.27.35 and running until 1.30.06**

On earth we're used to experiencing culture shock when we travel. The humans who travel to Pandora experience culture shock on a whole different level and struggle to understand what to them is an alien culture. While the scientists have made an effort to get alongside the Na'vi, the executives and security of RDA are unwilling to try.

Read out the following cultural customs to the young people. After each one, ask them what they think of the custom and if they can explain why this might be important in a certain culture (all of these are real examples of cultural practices):

- When you visit someone, you must drink three cups of coffee with them.
- If a guest says that they like an object in your house you must give it to them.
- The only men who may ever see a woman's face are her father, brothers and husband.
- If you pass something to someone you may never use your left hand.
- If you show someone the bottom of your feet it's a big insult.
- When you get married you must invite your boss to the wedding and allow them to make a speech at the reception.
- If you stick your chopsticks into a bowl of food so that they stand upright on their own it's a sign that you want someone at the table to die.
- If your host gives you a sheep's eye to eat you must swallow it whole or you'll offend them.

- Nod your head if you *disagree* with someone; shake it if you *agree*.

Explain that that you have some more cultural practices. Beforehand write each of the following on a piece of paper. Divide the young people into four groups. Explain that, once again, these practices all exist somewhere in the world. Each group must read out what is on their paper and must defend it, no matter what they think of it. The other groups must say what they think is strange about this custom:

- When you meet someone walking a dog you must greet the dog and ask after its health before you greet the owner.
- Never ask somebody what they earn or you will insult them.
- If you are sitting next to somebody on a train or bus don't start a conversation with them or they will think that you're a weird foreigner.
- Spend at least three hours a day staying in the same position, worshipping at an idol. (The idol is also known as 'TV' but don't read this out.)

Once each group has had its turn as if they know what culture these four points are describing (Britain).

This could act as a starting point for a number of different questions about different cultures:

- Is it always right to respect the customs of different cultures?
- What do you think you should do when you find it hard to understand a different culture?
- The Na'vi have a very different culture to our own. What do you like about it? What don't you like?
- When is it right to criticise a different culture? What should you do before you criticise?
- How would you feel if someone from a different part of the world criticised your culture?
- Are there things which you feel Britain could learn from other cultures?

*Key question:* Despite differences in culture, what do all human beings have in common?

*Relevant Bible verses:*

- Romans 3.9b–12
- 1 Corinthians 12.12–20
- Galatians 3.26–29
- Revelation 5.8–10

#### 4. Mating for life

##### The clip is in scene 19, starting at 1.18.10 and running until 1.21.12

In Na'vi culture when someone chooses a partner, they choose them for life. This is a big thing. Having chosen Neytiri Jake finds himself wondering if he's done the right thing.

Speed dating has become an increasingly popular way of getting to find potential partners, where people have no more than a few minutes to explain who they are to a member of the opposite sex before moving on to the next person.

Tell the young people that they have to prepare their speed dating 'pitch'-they have to sum themselves up in no more than a minute.

Ask those who are brave enough to pitch themselves to the rest of the group. Time them and cut-off anyone who goes over a minute.

Remind the group that when the Na'vi pick a partner, they pick them for life. Would anyone be willing to pick someone for life on the basis of the pitch that's just been given?

Point out that, in Na'vi culture, men and women only have sex ('mate') with their life partner. Do the group think that this is a good idea? How would it change our culture if that was how it worked in the UK? What would you want to know about someone before you chose them as a life partner?

*(This is a sensitive issue. Although it's something which young people desperately need guidance on, it would be unwise to address it unless both a male and female leader are present. Be prepared for follow up afterwards.)*

**Key question:** Why is it important not to rush into relationships?

**Relevant Bible verses:**

- Genesis 2.23–24
- Proverbs 5.15–23
- Malachi 2.13–16
- Matthew 19.1–12
- John 8.3–11

### 5. Just speaking to the trees?

**The clip is in scene 29, starting at 2.02.58 and running until 2.04.40**

The Na'vi go to special places, like the Tree of Souls, to pray to their god, Eywa.

Ask the group to list all the different ways in which they communicate with friends (face-to-face, mobiles, landlines, e-mails, postcards, letters?) With each communication method ask where they have to be in order to use it (e.g. in range of a phone mast for a mobile, near the sea for a message in a bottle, etc.).

In *Avatar* we see Jake praying at 'The Tree of Souls' (Anyone ever tried talking to a tree?) Where do we have to be in order to pray? Does it make any

difference if we're in a church? Why or why not?

Encourage the young people to share things on their minds which they would like to talk to God about in prayer. Explain that you will start and then give time for anyone who wants to pray out loud. You will then close in prayer.

Obviously, what you pray will depend on the make-up of the group and the issues being prayed for, but keep your opening and closing prayers clear and simple so that the young people have an easy model to follow.

You might want to say something like the following:

*Dear God,*

*Thank you that we don't have to be anywhere special to pray. Thank you that you hear us when we pray. Thank you that you want us to share these things with you. Thank you that you love us and that you have the power to answer our prayers. Amen.*

Alternatively, if you don't feel that praying out loud is appropriate at this stage with your group you could encourage them to write down a text to God. If they just had 160 characters to communicate to God with, what would they say?

**Key question:** Where do we have to go to pray?

**Relevant Bible verses:**

- Matthew 6.5–14
- Luke 18.1–8
- John 4.19–4
- Ephesians 6.18

### COMPARING THE STORY

The third part of the session is a chance to compare the story of the film with a story in the Bible. What are

the similarities and differences, and what does this tell us about God's Kingdom?

Young people may not grasp all the theological points that could be made, but it's important for them to begin to get used to the idea of critiquing what they see and holding it against the values and beliefs of the Christian faith.

Some of this reflection may come from an open discussion and as seen above, there are many themes and directions that this could take.

The story of Jake Sully in *Avatar* provides a very neat parallel with the life of Jesus Christ. Both came down to a strange planet, being at the same time fully human and fully 'something' else. Neither had it easy – both struggled to be accepted by the people they came to, yet both ended being the saviour for the people that they came to.

Explain that you are going to read a summary of what Jesus did when he came to earth. Read out Philippians 2.5–11, elaborating if necessary. Based on the passage and what the group know about Jesus' life, invite the young people to compare Jesus with Jake, both in a strange environment with a mission to fulfil. Move on to the differences. How far you take this will depend upon the understanding of the group but possible prompts could be:

- Are you a saviour to anyone?
- Jake's avatar was a saviour for a particular people at a particular time in a particular (fictional) place. What kind of saviour is Jesus?

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- Who do you think had the harder mission?
- What did they each have to sacrifice for the people they came to?
- Who were they tempted by and what was the temptation?
- What did they save people from?
- Do you need saving from anything?



BY APPOINTMENT TO THE KING OF KINGS  
SERVING YOUNG PEOPLE  
FOR OVER ONE HUNDRED YEARS